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ABSTRACT

This digest focuses on meeting the educational needs of recent Asian Pacific American (APA) immigrants. Newcomers usually have various levels of English proficiency, and many find school rules incomprehensible because they differ so widely from their previous experiences. In addition, American teachers expect children to be interactive, creative, and participatory, while APA parents teach their children to be quiet and obedient, and not to question teachers. Adding to the communication problems between teachers and students are the personal challenges that many newcomers face. Teachers, administrators, and counselors need to understand students' home culture and discourse rules and the similarities and differences between Asian and American schools. They must guard against stereotyping children and work to make them comfortable in the classroom. Teachers can improve APA students' discourse skills by making no assumptions about what they know or do not know, while anticipating possible challenges. They should encourage students in social activities and facilitate their transition into mainstream culture while nurturing their bicultural identities. Schools need to work hard to encourage the participation of newcomer parents. Although educators can find it hard to learn about the language, culture, and social background of every student, they can develop the ability to communicate effectively across cultures and form effective partnerships with immigrant families. (Contains 10 references.) (SLD)

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Enhancing the Communication Skills of Newly-Arrived Asian American Students.

by
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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION

DIGEST

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ENHANCING THE COMMUNICATION SKILLS OF NEWLY-ARRIVED ASIAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

The number of Asian/Pacific Americans (APAs) in the United States has increased significantly in recent decades, largely resulting from the exodus of millions of Southeast Asians to this country. APAs continue to arrive through sponsorships and business visas, despite tightened immigration policies and other restrictions. They now number eight million.

One motivating factor for APA immigration is the quality and flexibility of education in the U.S. Indeed, the Confucian tradition emphasizes the importance of education, and new immigrants work hard to overcome linguistic and cultural challenges to obtain a good one. Traditional Asian families expect their children to do well in school, and may feel ashamed and responsible if a child does poorly or needs special attention. In addition to regular schooling, many Asian American parents take their children to community language schools on weekends, expecting them to increase their home language skills and maintain their native culture.

The new APA immigrants vary greatly in their time of arrival, prior education, economic status, and immigration history, among other factors. Some are unaccompanied minors; others are graduate students with broader experiences and exposure to their own culture and language. The younger students seem to adjust more quickly. The cultural and historical backgrounds of APAs also affect adjustment. Southeast Asians who were not prepared for their immigration have often found the adjustment process frustrating and frightening. Conversely, other Asian immigrants, including East Indians, Pakistanis, and those from Asian Pacific areas, grew up bilingually and do not find the English language too much of a challenge, yet their cultural differences can still be difficult to negotiate.

This digest focuses on meeting the educational needs of recently immigrated children. It offers educators some suggestions for understanding, motivating, and empowering students, and for working with their parents.

Challenges for Asian/Pacific American Children And Their Teachers

Making learning an exciting and meaningful process is challenging for teachers of newcomer students, for they must find creative ways to make connections with them (Moss-Kanter, 1995). The newcomers usually have various levels of English language proficiency, and may have limited opportunities to practice the language outside the school setting. Moreover, school discourse is generally more formal than other communication, and it is guided by a set of linguistic and social rules that are conveyed through oral and written, and nonverbal, messages and interaction. Many newcomer students find the rules incomprehensible because they differ so widely from their experiences in Asian classrooms. APA children who live in "ethnic enclaves" (such as Flushing, New York, and Little Saigon in southern California) experience particular difficulty in gaining both basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive academic linguistic proficiency (CALP) in English (Cummins, 1981). So, while some APA students actively engage in verbal discourse with their teachers, others are disenfranchised during classroom discussions and risk school failure.

Further, American teachers expect students to be interactive, creative, and participatory, while APA parents teach their children to be quiet and obedient, and not to question teachers (Cheng, 1991, 1994). APA children are used to learning through listening, observing, reading, and imitating; responding to teachers' questions based on lectures and textbooks; and taking tests that require only the recall of factual information. Thus typical American classroom activities leave students feeling ambivalent and confused. American teachers may misinterpret students' resulting behavior as a sign of deficiency:

- *Delay or hesitation in response*: Students may be unsure of an answer or unfamiliar with the discourse style, or they may simply feel disengaged and lost.
- *Frequent topic shifts and poor topic maintenance*: Students may not have sufficient knowledge to maintain the topic, not be familiar with the rules for gaining the floor of the classroom, or simply fear and avoid interactions.
- *Inappropriate nonverbal expressions*: Students may avoid eye contact with adults (a sign of respect in Asian culture), frown (in concentration, as opposed to displeasure), or giggle (from embarrassment or lack of understanding, not in response to something perceived as humorous).
- *Short responses*: Students may not be proficient enough to reply in long, cohesive utterances, or they may be too shy to respond.
- *Use of a soft-spoken voice*: A loud voice may signal disrespect in some Asian cultures.
- *Taking few risks*: Students may fear being embarrassed or ridiculed by saying something foolish.
- *Lack of participation and failure to offer information*: In Asian classrooms volunteering information may be considered bold.
- *Embarrassment over praise*: Students' native culture may regard humility and self-criticism highly.
- *Atypical greeting rituals*: Students may appear impolite or unfriendly because they look down (out of respect or fear) when the teacher approaches instead of offering a greeting.

Adding to communication problems between teachers and APA students are the personal challenges that many newcomers face, some of which affect their ability to learn. They include: an impoverished background; crowded living quarters with no place to study; a poor education in their native land (a particular problem for older children); parents who do not feel comfortable getting involved in the school system; and a lack self-esteem and feeling different from the other students, which can be exacerbated by the segregation of students with limited English proficiency (Posnick-Goodwin, 1998).

Strategies for Overcoming Cultural Differences Between Educators and Students

To communicate effectively, and to accurately determine the children's communicative competence, administrators, teachers, and counselors need to understand students' home culture and discourse rules, and the similarities and differences between Asian and American schools. When problems arise with a student, they have to consider a combination of explanations, including linguistic, cultural, traumatic, or neuro-physical (Cheng & Chang, 1995). They also need to examine the cultural dimensions of interaction between themselves and their students, and guard against stereotyping children or generalizing by relying on catalogs of cultural patterns. To help themselves overcome cultural differences, educators can do the following (Cheng, Chen, Tsubo, Sekandari, & Alfafara-Killacky, 1997):

- Explore their own background to better understand their attitudes about their own culture and other cultures.

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- Learn about all aspects the students' various cultures, and develop an appreciation for their cultural beliefs, perceptions, and values.
- Understand and act on the fact that the most effective interventions take account of students' backgrounds.
- Consider the individual first. While it is important to incorporate the student's culture in an effective manner, focusing on the individual rather than a group is key to improving the quality of service in school settings.
- Place newcomer students in programs, classrooms, and situations that are appropriate to their level of English language proficiency and cultural acclimation, monitor their ability to function in all aspects of school life, and be aware of changes in the settings that can affect their ability to function in them.

Classroom Strategies for Improving APA Student Discourse Skills

The following suggestions can help create an optimal language learning environment for newcomer students (Cheng, 1989, 1996):

- Make no assumptions about what students know or do not know, and anticipate their needs and greatest challenges.
- Expect frustration and possible misunderstandings.
- Encourage students to join social organizations (such as student clubs) to increase their exposure to language as a social tool and to different types of discourse.
- Facilitate students' transition into mainstream culture through activities like discussions of culturally unique experiences and celebrations, such as birthday parties and Thanksgiving.
- Nurture the students' bicultural identity by infusing all aspects of the curriculum with multicultural elements and telling stories of famous people from both Asian and other ethnic groups; for example, children who speak Chinese at home and practice Buddhism can share information about their lives and also learn about Christian holidays.

Teachers can also use specific learning activities to promote newcomers' English language development and comfort with American school culture. For example, they can do the following:

- Provide explicit comparisons between languages (i.e., Chinese is tonal and non-inflectional, while English is intonational and inflectional; Japanese has two writing systems, kanji and kana).
- Explicitly explain school discourse rules, and the written and unwritten rules that govern writing styles. Model them repeatedly.
- Role play, practice colloquialisms, and create skits with scripts loaded with school discourse rules for the students: "Teacher: 'Hi! Su-Ming.' Su-Ming: 'Good morning, Mrs. Douglass.' Teacher: 'I like your shoes, they are very pretty.' Su-Ming: 'Oh, thank you very much.'"
- Read to students to increase their vocabulary, and expose them to various narrative styles (i.e., letters, stories, newspapers, magazines, biographies, poetry).

Strategies for Making Connections With Newcomer Families

Parents who are having their own difficulties in adapting to a new language and culture may feel inadequate to help their children with schoolwork or socialization. Also, because of homeland traditions, many Asian American parents do not believe that it is important to become involved in their children's schools or education.

Students benefit significantly from their parents' involvement, however; they feel less marginalized as they view themselves and their families as constructive members of the school community. Even more significant, families can play an important role in their children's social, language, and literacy development by involving themselves in their education (Chang, Lai, & Shimizu, 1995). In addition, parents can aid teachers by informing them about their children's use of home and school language, the educational resources available at home, and the community resources available to their children.

Thus, schools need to work hard to encourage the involvement of newcomer parents in both school activities and literacy learning at home; they need to reach into the community and establish a partnership with their students' families. Community members should also actively encourage parents to become involved in school activities. Mentors can explain about American education expectations and schools. PTA members can serve as models for APA newcomer parents and can encourage them to become active in the organization.

Some specific suggestions for parent involvement in school include: volunteering for school activities, such as field trips; helping in the office, the library, or the classroom; preparing food for bake sales and student social events; and participating in multicultural fairs.

Conclusion

Given the complexity of the Asian/Pacific American student population, educators can find it difficult to learn about every student's language, culture, and social background. However, the ability to communicate effectively across cultures can be developed, and educators can establish mutually beneficial partnerships with immigrant families. Integrating cross-cultural competence into a school's culture, and designing teaching strategies specifically to meet the educational needs of newcomers, can significantly improve both the academic achievement and social acclimation of immigrant students.

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